

**AARON A. R. NWABUDE & GORDON ADE-OJO**

## **CHANGING TIMES, CHANGING ROLES: FE COLLEGES' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR CHANGING LEADERSHIP ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY UK POLITICO-ECONOMIC CLIMATE**

### **Abstract**

The work reported in this paper is part of a study that explored some of the roles of Further Education Colleges in the United Kingdom. The paper is based largely on literature from books and on-line resources and short interviews from five British further education colleges, but also on the author's views and experience. The major aim of the essay was to explore the notion and beliefs that the further education colleges are the champions of leadership in education within our society. The study also aimed at examining the institutional factors from the perspective of leaders, and how these may impact on their mission statements, and the engagement of people and community in learning where they are situated. The paper found that the colleges, in addition to fulfilling the primary role of developing talent and innovation capacity of the community by encouraging people to have a second chance at education and leisure, providing vocational qualifications and other great learning that are below level two, they also engage in the social challenges that face the community, for example, faith issues, extremism and drugs. They are the power base in which to build the creativity sector of the community, which will drive directly the country's competitiveness. They are nonetheless, associated traditionally with transactional model of leadership which builds on order and accountability. However, there are still few institutional challenges faced by the colleges in general, which included the issues of raising the aspiration of young people and removal of racial tension which characterised the past. There is also the issue of working with young people in the community and, actually making sure they begin to trust and to view colleges in a positive light. Finally there is little evidence of institutional enthusiasm for working in partnership with other Agencies in order to promote well being, ensuring students' work continues.

*Keywords:* Further education colleges, Leadership roles, Transactional, Transformational leadership, Creativity, Vocational qualifications, Management, College Missions

### **Introduction: Traditional Further Education Colleges Roles in the Community**

The conceptions of leaders in education seem pretty obvious; engagement in learning, providing vocational education, building support services, encouragement and empowerment of people. However, further education (FE) colleges can do more than just that; they are typically leaders in their community, not just only in education but as institutions that can drive economic development and regeneration through their presence, participation and leadership (Rammell, 2008). Change in people's opinion and attitude because of good leadership will ultimately lead to change in the culture of the community; consequently, will bring about change in respective behaviour of individuals. While FE sector core role remains the development of talent and innovation capacity of the country, the focus extends

beyond purely vocational and includes the ability to engage with the social challenges that face our society. The colleges have the responsibility of engaging with some of the more challenging aspects of the community life. In some areas, this includes working directly with the communities to develop resilience to those ideologies that promote hatred and violence. Therefore, the crucial role played by FE sector in the community cannot be over emphasised, especially in the current economic climate and the new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). Today, Further Education Colleges are the resource of power base to build up the skills sector, knowledge sector, and the creativity sector of the community that will derive Britain's competitiveness directly. Kevin Brennan MP (2009), maintained that FE sector primarily is a focal point in helping people and businesses to come through the recession, in helping people make the most of their talents and their lives, and in building a better Britain. It is therefore the view of this paper that Further Education sector is a second chance manager, which provides opportunity for people who may not get through the education system first time round successfully. In recognising the place of FE in our contemporary society and in realising the intellectual environment and commitment to shared values and vision, Further Education sector therefore can be viewed as the leader in education in our communities.

### **Current Politico-economic Climate and Basic Questions about Changing Roles**

The research that forms the basis for this paper deals specifically with the general dimension of leadership in Further Education sector. In our world of changing paradigm in education, management differences have a significant impact on leadership and therefore on the understanding of roles played by Further Education Colleges. In the past, it was a general belief that Further Education sector had no distinguishing roles within the community; however, that perception has changed over the years as Further Education Colleges assumed the leadership roles by providing vocational and technical knowledge base education, which leads to increased skills need of young people within the community. Again the past scepticism over their leadership is becoming less hierarchical and more participatory. This paper also focuses on the most important aspects of personal development and competence in today's intellectual field. Nowadays, the main challenge for Further Education Colleges as leaders is the management change in policy in education; including community needs, learners' needs, cultural differences, business, innovation and skills acquisition that will enable our young people to compete favourably in the world job market. This paper therefore, will discuss some of the intractable and management issues surrounding Further Education Colleges and the Colleges' need to sustain leadership imbalance in business, innovation and skills; and in doing so, looks at a number of issues and responsibilities pertaining to leadership and educational management in the sector. It is assumed that by 2025, FE colleges should become the backbone of an inclusive lifelong learning system and culture, and working in close co-operation with various local and national partners (Niace, 2009) to promote coherent vocational education and skills.

## Research Approach, Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Research approach is the combination of qualitative and quantitative models. This paper is based on the online research of five British further education colleges. These colleges are located in different parts of UK to include; London and South East, North East and North West of England. A number of factors played in the use of online research journals and books; these include the nature of study which is purely to establish through relevant journals that further education colleges are truly the leaders in education. The method of data collection is through on-line questionnaire administered to 5 selected FE colleges covering three main regions – SE, NE, and NW as above. *There is no guarantee of justified sampling, nevertheless, provides preliminary insights into the activities of the colleges.* The researcher had visited the websites of the colleges and had made telephone interviews to the colleges concerned. This consolidatory approach is used to provide further insights into the information made available through the questionnaire. Developing from the above, the researcher draws upon the quantitative and qualitative data from literatures to ask the questions around the issues on the current role of FE colleges and whether FE colleges actually see themselves as leaders within the community. This was necessary considering the time and scope of the study and what it was meant to achieve. There were no difficulties in developing the few questions and in obtaining responses to the questions asked. This was made possible through the review of the literatures on the FE leadership and various government white papers on the topic. Interviews with the institutions took only a few minutes and were based on open-ended questions which were asked to all five colleges. The aim of the interviews was to highlight the major roles played by the colleges which impacts on the student personal development and competence in today's intellectual field, and the community cultural cohesion. The interviews also seek the colleges' views about their mission statements and how they are meeting these missions; their perceptions of the role of the college in facilitating student learning within the multicultural Britain, and the process of integration of different faiths within the community. Interview findings were subjected to straight forward content analysis and questionnaires were statistically analysed to gain further insights into frequency of views of the organisations.

## Research Findings

The findings in this study are limited only to five further education colleges with a view to establishing their leadership roles through their missions and activities, their attendance to personal and community needs in the current educational dispensation. The colleges are identified by letters – A, B, C, D and E. The relevance and perceptions reflected in the findings are associated to the theories of leadership in each of the models summarised above. The results generated from the interview sessions provide important but similar answers with that obtained from literature. In addition to the interviews, a diverse sample from the web allows for exploitation and exploration of specialist roles and differences amongst the colleges. Consistent with the literature on the roles of further education colleges, the provision of vocational education emerged as one of the core roles to emphasise when one looks at the leadership roles played by the Colleges. The FE colleges, including the

five used as samples, provide leadership roles within their community that promote community cohesion, shared values and prevention of violent extremisms, in addition to giving second chance to the students in their communities. FE college leaders, through the Association of Schools and Colleges (AoE) engage with debate on the role of their colleges because it recognises the centrality and influence that it has had both historically and currently. The colleges aspire to be at the heart of the community they serve and the variety of missions adopted by the five sampled F.E colleges demonstrates this very clearly. The FE colleges come in different shapes and sizes – the students' population usually range between 500 for the smallest to 44000 students' for the largest; they also have different missions and ways of pursuing and managing those missions. In this analysis, I discuss only two of the colleges sampled because I am guided by the paper length for publication.

#### *A - College*

The 'A' college mission statement is to provide excellent quality of education, which meets the skills needs of the economy and a commitment to promoting equality and widening participation in education. The college works in partnership with the local council, local people and the police network in order to build and promote unity in services. Gang culture and violence is a typical example where the 'A' college is working assiduously with the police and local council to eradicate the menace. The college also embarked on safe and strong campaign to combat all forms of crime within the college and in the community. The college maintains that young people have choices, and they need to make the right choices that are presented to them through education and community cohesion. There is certain number of risks associated with gang culture in the college, which could be an attack on the staff, a member of the public or student losing money or a member of the gang going to jail. This college strives to put an end if possible to this menace. The college also works with other charitable organisations in providing support to young people in the community; some of the supports they provide include:

- Helping gangs get back to the society/community;
- Taking teaching and learning to hostels to meet disadvantaged groups;
- The facilitation of adult training and learning for students requiring childcare;
- Support for childcare students on work experience within the nurseries section;
- Delivering high levels of learner success and meeting the skills needs of the economy.

The 'A' college has built a strong partnership link with the local authority and other agencies in the community, and this link has helped to support local community efforts and prosperity (Lambeth College Childcare Policy, 2007).

#### *B - College*

The focus for 'B' college is on practical courses that work – for young people, adults and employers. (Stoke on Trent Corporate Information, 2009). Their mission statement is excellence in education and skills for work and life. The college also focus on economic and social wellbeing and up-skilling the local work force in the community. Other activities and roles include, but not limited to the following:

- Addressing the needs of the community industrial base;
- Focussing on customer needs and services as a competitive tool and requirement;
- Engaging the community in the 'Learning and Skills' agenda;
- Delivering training in all businesses - ranging from engineering to hotel management and hospitality, and customer services needs as competitive tool;
- Increasing the proportion of local learners progressing to and achieving Higher Education qualifications in the region;
- Building partnership with companies such as Churchill China; and
- Developing people with mechanical and technical skills.

In the past, education in this college was central to what the college thinks appropriate, however; now, education is directed towards skills for improving local and national businesses. The College maintains flexible partnership with companies, ensuring NVQ training provides what the industries need. This effort really made a significant progress with local business communities in the region.

### **Preliminary Conclusions**

According to Cristofoli and Watts (2005), the further education sector has an important role to play in achieving national and regional aspirations for widening participation. *The fundamental responsibilities and roles of the FE colleges are to provide vocational education to both young and adult learners in the community, and to support the lifelong learning of these individuals. These two objectives are interlinked. Although, the FE colleges' roles have been expanding lately and there is evidence of high level of flexibility in terms of perceptions, the perceptive roles however, bestrides both transactional and transformational paradigms, and this has brought great benefits to the community, but also backed up by creativity.* Rather than focusing specifically on direct coordination, control, and supervision of curriculum and instruction, FE sector seek meaningful mission purpose to support the development of change in practices of teaching and learning, policy and community need. The agenda to widen participation addresses two long-standing and interrelated policy concerns: promoting and sustaining economic growth and overcoming social exclusion. Hallinger (2003) posits that FE sector strategically maintains a distributed role that focuses on sustaining economic growth and overcoming social exclusion, developing a shared vision and shared commitment to colleges and community change. Following, Grace (1997) takes the notion that "transformative leadership involves considerable social skills of advocacy, inter-group relations, team building and inspiration without domination". Furthermore, he advocates that this kind of leadership is exercised by a "community of Leaders" as a reflection of the permeation of democratic values, which will "transform the very nature of leadership itself" (Aspinwall, 1998). Developing the above from Foster's transformational and ethical leadership perspective, a leader works with others in the community to obtain transformations of undesirable features of schooling culture and practice. These features might be the existence of racism, sexism, cultism, gang violence and issues of faith in educational practices. It could be the existence of prejudice against particular religious or regional groups or against those with a range

of disabilities and disadvantages in the community (Crawford et al, 1997). One can rightly say that allegiance in terms of leadership model appears to be induced by personal and immediate needs of the society. Halpin & Croft (1966) contends that leadership includes attendance to personal needs; that a successful leader should contribute to group objectives and to group relationship. However, politics and economy can be highly significant in dictating the directions of leadership allegiance. The critical issue or question this paper seeks to engage with is the FE sector's attendance to students' personal needs and community needs at large.

It is vitally important to note that in building future prosperity, wealth creation is the engine; this engine comes through knowledge and skills that further education colleges impart on young people everywhere in our communities. One of the core roles of further education colleges is the development of talent and innovation capacity of the community and the country through the provision of vocational education. However, the current focus has shifted and extends beyond purely vocational and includes the ability to engage with the social challenges that faces our society in this day and age. For instance, in preventing violent extremism, further education colleges promote a shared culture of openness and pluralism with the wider community, regardless of the specific status, location or faith affiliation of the college. Further education colleges also build and support the welfare of individuals, and groups of students through professional standards for teachers, contractual and safeguarding frameworks for all adults working with children and young people, including 'Every Child Matters' outcomes for young people – all require the duty of care and, where necessary, the taking of action. Partnership and collaboration between colleges and other education and training providers is essential ingredient to the successful delivery of new Diplomas and certificates. The DCSF's modelling for future participation heavily relies on further education remaining the biggest provider of 16-19 education, with the vast majority of colleges offering Diplomas since September 2009. Following recent overhaul of education in the UK, it is anticipated that further education colleges would even be lumbered with more responsibilities in the provision of higher qualifications in collaboration with various universities within the community and regions. Developing from the above, there is no question about the role of further education colleges as leaders of education within the communities.

## References

- Aspinwall, K. (1998), *Leading the Learning School*. London: Lemos & Crane.
- Brennan, K. (2009), *Vision for the new department*. The Guardian FE Leadership Summit; Hilton London Metropole Hotel, London, 17 June 2009.
- Crawford, M. (1997), *Leadership and Teams in Educational management*. Open University Press.
- Cristofoli, L. W. & Watts, M. (2005), *The Role of the Regional Forum in Education Colleges in Delivering Higher Education in the East of England*. <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/vhi/cert/HE%20in%20FE%20report.pdf> Accessed 22 June 2009.
- Grace, G. (1997), *Leadership in a learning organisation and its self-evaluation: exercises and their introduction*. Paper for the DESLO Project, 2001. <http://www.progettodeslo.it/documents/Palmira2.pdf>. Accessed 17 June 2009 Accessed March 2010.

- Hallinger, P. (2003), Leading Educational change: Reflections on the Practice of Instructional and Transformational Leadership. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 33, 2003, p.330.
- Halpin, A. W. & Croft, D. B. (1966), *Theory and research in administration*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Lambeth College Childcare Policy (2007) (11/03/07), [http://www.lambethcollege.ac.uk/\\_docs/governors/Student\\_Affairs\\_Committee\\_Minutes\\_23\\_November\\_2011.pdf](http://www.lambethcollege.ac.uk/_docs/governors/Student_Affairs_Committee_Minutes_23_November_2011.pdf) Accessed June 2011.
- NIACE (2009), *FE Colleges in a New Culture of Adult and Lifelong Learning: Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning (IFLL)*. Sector Paper 7.
- Rammell, B. (2008), The role of Further Education Providers in promoting community cohesion, fostering shared values and preventing violent extremism. [http://www.dius.gov.uk/consultations/violent\\_extremism](http://www.dius.gov.uk/consultations/violent_extremism). Accessed 12/02/09 Accessed March 2010.
- Stoke on Trent, Mission statement/strategic objectives (2009), <http://www.stokecoll.ac.uk/corporate/corporate-missionobjectives.asp> Accessed 26 July 2009.

Aaron A. R. Nwabude  
Cass School of Education & Communities  
University of East London  
England, UK  
u0110988@uel.ac.uk

Dr Gordon O. Ade-Ojo  
School of Education and Training  
University of Greenwich  
England, UK  
g.o.adeojo@gre.ac.uk